

A Hen-man's Life by Robert Stanley Petty. 1986.

In the following pages I have tried to record some of the events during my employment on the poultry farm of H.I. Everitt Ltd. Inevitably many things are beyond recall but I thought it worth the effort as the style of life I have had these 57 years is now gone, and not likely to return.

Chapter One

My introduction to poultry farming came in October 1946, when after five years army service during the war, I was offered a job by Mr. Everitt, thanks mainly I think to my father-in-law, Walter Sadler.

As a matter of interest wages then were £4 a week, little enough when compared with today's inflated rates, but with a bit of overtime and my wife working in the fruit farm during the summer months we were able to manage a reasonable standard of life.

Looking back over the years it is surprising the number of changes in poultry breeds and methods of husbandry there have been, from strictly free range to the intensive care of battery cages and deep litter houses.



Many changes too in the types of transport, from horse and cart and jalopes to tractors, all of which have helped to make work amongst the poultry interesting.

I soon realised that the farm was divided into two sections, one the Home Farm, where incubating and brooding was done, and where most of the breeding pens were situated, Mr. Harry Canham was foreman here. The other section was Flexon, where the open air rearing was done and over the years more breeding pens were built. Here too, were buildings containing the milling equipment and the various ingredients for mixing meal was stored. The man in charge here was Mr. Tony Murfitt, incredibly he is still there after 41 years.

In those days Mr. Everitt reared his chickens from day old in brooders, heated by oil lamps on his lawn round his house, gradually hardening them off until at four to five weeks of age they transferred to the open air at Flexon. Here they were reared in 6 x 4s, small wooden huts until 12 to 16 weeks of age, when they were either sold or transferred to bigger houses.

My first job was clearing out some empty houses; this involved cleaning out straw and burning it and sweeping up. "Docky time", is eleven o'clock I was told. This stumped me, never having heard the word before, but it was explained that it was the time we stopped for lunch. I still do after all these years.

I must admit for the first few weeks I found it very strange earning my living in civvy street after the regimented life of the army, but it was great being able to go home to my wife and son every day.

After a few weeks I was called in to help with the chick rearing, Strangely enough though I have never had any previous experience of this type of work, after a few days I found the work came easy and I felt at home amongst the birds. I may have spent all of my youth in a town, but I was born on a farm in Sevenoaks, Kent, where my father worked and my grandfather was a shepherd and stockman all his life, so it seems I may have inherited his skill with animals

Chapter Two

That first winter at work 1947 was to be one never to be forgotten, the coldest for years, I have never experienced such severe weather, huge snowdrifts and terrible frosts. The roads were in a terrible state, it was impossible to cycle, but I was fortunate that I had a little over a mile to slog through the snow.

These were hard times for the young chicks, how so many survived I shall never know, penned in their houses by deep snow so unable to get food or water until we cleared a space for them. What a struggle we had with the water. Picks, crowbars and axes had to be used to break the ice, no sooner we cleared the troughs than they froze over again. It was very fortunate that a Fordson tractor was available to pull a water cart about. Spring was never more welcome than when it came that year but the thaw brought other problems. We on high ground had only mud to contend with but many local fens were flooded,

With the coming of the warmer weather came another endless job: grass cutting. This was mostly done with an Allen scythe, a useful tool that would cut through anything including wire netting, as I soon found out. It was here that I had my first lessons in using a scythe, a tool I have never really mastered, especially the art of sharpening the blade with a rubstone.

Other jobs I had to learn was to vaccinate against Fowl Pox, using a small metal tool, roughening up the skin on a leg and brushing on vaccine, very similar to that done to human beings» A very time consuming job and not a very pleasant one in cold weather.

The annual visit of the Ministry Veterinary Officers for blood testing for Bacillary White Diarrhoea (B.W.D.) was another painstaking job. All the breeding hens had to be caught up and a minute drop of blood was taken from one wing, and mixed with a solution on a tray. The birds were then penned up for 15 minutes, if there was no reaction they were then released. A reactor meant doing that particular pen again,

Years later another vaccinating programme was introduced to control the scourge of Fowl Pest, This involved injecting a vaccine into a leg of the birds. ,

The more modern way of vaccinating against Epidemic Tremors and Infectious Bronchitis is much simpler, it is added to water. The drinking water is turned off for an hour and the solution is put into the drinkers and is taken immediately by the birds.

Chapter Three

In those early days carting the food about was a problem. A handcart was alright when you were close to the barns, but as the farm expanded so some other form of transport was urgently needed. This was when Bess the old mare was borrowed from the fruit farm. Mr Everitt had bought an old milk float, fitted it with rubber tyres and it proved to be a successful combination. Soon that mare knew what was expected of her, at each 'Gee up she would plod off to the next gate, and would not budge until told,

I have many memories of her, for I used her more than anyone else. Come rain or shine I have loaded the cart with pails of wheat and every day about 12pm I started out on the afternoon feed, and arrived back about 3.30 pm in time for George-to groom and feed her. We had her about three years as far as I can remember, she was then replaced with the jalopes.

These jalopes were old Morris Oxforas or Cowleys, stripped down, with the cab left on and a wooden platform built on the chassis. There were four in all, petrol driven and very temperamental. The games we had getting them to start. They had to be cranked by handle, and did they kick! Woe



Vehicle fleet

behold you, if you had your hand the wrong way.

Many a day we managed to start one and towed the others halfway across the farm before they would start. Despite this they proved very useful and saved a lot of time, for the farm had expanded rapidly and now covered a hundred acres.

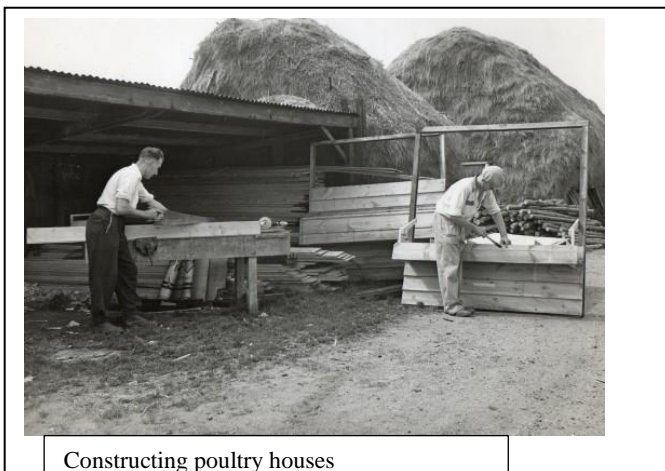
It was about this time 1949/50 that I used to get company on my afternoon

rounds during the summer months, I used to collect my son Michael then four years old, from his mother whenever she was in the fruit gardens. It was a pleasure to have him and he enjoyed himself.

Chapter Four

The adult birds were housed in wooden houses of Mr. Everitt's own design, built in sections 12ft, long for easy handling. Five sections to a house, bolted together, making a complete house of 60ft, by 12ft. The front, the highest point was 8ft, high, the end sections sloping down to 4ft. at the rear. At the top of each front section an area 1½ ft, wide was left open for ventilation, this was covered by wire netting to keep the wild birds out. Screening this was a weather board protruding out 18 inches. Also incorporated in this section were a row of nest boxes 1ft. square, these too protruded outwards. Two doors were built into the end sections. The whole framework was made with sawn-up sleeper wood and clad with feather edge board. The roof was covered by corrugated iron. A gutter was fitted along the back to catch the rain water and this emptied into a hundred gallon tank at one end. A small pen was added to this end for holding broody hens. A broody hen is one which has finished its laying cycle and spends all its time in the nest box, trying to hatch out the eggs. We normally pen them for 48 hours and then hopefully they start laying again.

Inside the house about half the width was taken up by a dropping board, and perches built high enough off the floor to allow a wheel barrow to be pushed along under its edge to facilitate the cleaning out.



Constructing poultry houses

In the earlier houses a meal hopper 8ft. long built in one end but later on this was scrapped in favour of metal hoppers spread along the whole house.

These houses were all made on the farm by farm labour. The sleeper wood was supplied by Mr. Woolstenholmes of Hillrow Haddenham. One day I was sent there in the old Ford lorry to collect a load. On arrival I remember seeing a young girl about three years old. I little realised then that youngster was to become our daughter-in-law and bring a lot of happiness into our lives.

Each house had an area of about half an acre for the birds to scratch and roam about in, and it was surrounded by a 5ft. high wire fence. If my memory serves me right there were 80 houses in all, so you can imagine the miles of wire netting needed to contain the stock they held, which was approximately 25 head a house.

The system of feeding in those days, consisted of a ration of dry meal in the morning, and a scratch feed of wheat in the afternoons. The corn pail was then used to collect up the eggs. The breeding hens had a special ration of meal. I am afraid I cannot remember the exact contents, but it consisted of Pollards, (milled wheat) Fish meal, Meat and Bone meal, and Molasses. A generous portion of Cod Liver Oil was also added. The whole heap amounted to about two tons and we had to mix it by hand. I must confess it was a job I didn't look forward to, but it had to be done. There was just room for two of us to work in the shed, so using shovels Harry and I turned that heap four times. What a state we got into, covered in dust, we were glad to get out into the fresh air.

Chapter Five

It was always my intention to get experience in all aspects of poultry keeping, so when after several years of rearing growers in open grass pens the opportunity arose of helping out in an intensive brooder house. I was very pleased to accept.

This meant me moving from Flexon to the Home farm and coming under Harry Canham's influence. He had a reputation for being an awkward man to get on with, expected his own way and did not believe in changes. I was just the opposite always looking for ways of improving existing methods. We had a few arguments, but he was a good workman, and over the years I had a good working relationship with him.



Bob and Harry
Canham

The new brooder house was a modern brick building divided into two sections. The southern side was fitted out with stacks of electrically heated brooders made by Curfew, Ottershaw, Surrey. These were controlled by thermostat and 150 chicks were housed in each, making 600 in each stack. For the first few days movement was severely restricted, chick crumbs were placed on boards in the brooder, a water fountain was placed just outside. Gradually they were allowed out until the end of the week, they had the freedom of the brooder, and had access to an automatic water system.

At four to five weeks of age they were transferred to the northern side into rearing stacks which held them until eight weeks of age. Those were not heated but an electric hover was placed in each for the first week. An electric hover is a metal cone on legs with a heater fitted inside under which the birds can gather if they feel cold. Mr. Everitt did most of the feeding, my task was to keep them mucked out twice a week.'

The next stage was to move the birds out into wooden brooders with covered runs in an open-fronted shed for a week to harden off before being carted off to Flexon and the grass pens.

This was a very interesting period of my life on the farm, but also a very busy one, as it was a continuous process, with a strict timetable to keep.

Mondays meant that the older birds had to be cleared out to Flexon, their brooders mucked out and replaced by clean ones. These were then filled by the oldest birds from the brooder house. In turn these stacks had to be stripped down and washed ready for the next intake from the brooders on the other side. These brooders then had to be stripped down and washed ready for a fresh crop of day-olds from the incubators the following Monday. In the peak periods the days were simply not long enough, at times it was a desperate struggle to get things ready. I can remember working until nine-o'clock at night to catch up.

All washing was done by hand by the women. At that time there were three, Mrs, Sadler, Ina Canham, and my wife, Lily. Theirs was not the pleasantest of jobs, especially during the cold weather, but they worked hard and did it well. As much as possible was put into tanks to soak and then washed with stiff bristle brushes using caustic soda. Later on power pumps were brought into use, making the job a much easier.

It was not unusual for an odd bird or two to escape from the brooders in the long shed. We often had to chase them about on the lawns beside the house. One day Lily and Ina saw a bird on the grass so tried to catch it. It proved rather illusive, running in and out of the hedgerow and after half an hour gave up in disgust. On looking round they saw the Boss laughing his head off: "You silly Bs, don't you recognise a Moorhen when you see one,"

Chapter Six

Mr, Everitt was a noted breeder of White Wyandotte's, and he was extremely proud of his flock. He did not believe in-keeping any bird of inferior quality, so he was ruthless in his culling methods. Usually two nights a week were allocated for culling, which meant going in to all the breeding houses picking out those birds that were not-up to scratch, sometimes as many as 300 a night. This was a job which was more convenient to do in the evenings when it was dark, when all the birds would be on the perches. With the aid of a torch, we walked through and took out all the weak ones. It was not too bad a job in the winter months when an early start would be made, but in the late Spring it was not unusual to get done about midnight.

These culls had to be got rid of, so they were plucked and packed in crates, carted to Ely station, and sent to the poultry dealers in London,

In those early days we had no modern equipment, just an old shed about 12ft, square with a corrugated iron roof and a dry plucker, revolving discs driven by electricity, which removed the feathers and half the skin, if you were not careful.

Later on we were given more up-to date machinery, a dip tank of hot water in which you immersed the birds for a few seconds, and then bounced them on a revolving drum fitted with rubber fingers which removed the feathers very quickly, so we were able to speed up production.

The only trouble was in very cold weather the hot water generated steam which condensed on the tin roof and dripped all over us, so working conditions were not very good, I hate to think what a Public Health Inspector would have done under today's rules and regulations,

In time a purpose built plucking shed, with a cooling room was provided. It is still there, unfortunately little used these days.

Chapter Seven

One of the most notable changes over the years was in the method of incubation. When Mr Everitt started he had a small annex on the side of his house, where he hatched a small quantity of eggs every week. His method was very primitive, turning the eggs with damp fingers to provide the necessary moisture. Never-the-less he had some remarkable results,

In the 1950's his business had grown so much that he had a brick building built to house modern incubators. These were "Primula" machines made by George Neave, Stalham, Norfolk. They combined both setting and hatching and capable of holding 4000 eggs. Six machines were installed at first, but within two years the hatchery was extended and four more added.

They were handsome looking machines of highly polished wood, with chrome fittings. Levers at the back made it easy to turn the eggs, which was done four times a day. They were heated by electricity and thermostatically controlled. Inside on the floor were pans, capable of holding a couple of gallons

of water in each which provided the moisture. These were topped up during the-week using warm water.



Incubators

The walls of the building were Snowsem white, kept clean by Kath, who was a dab hand at mixing and applying it. The whole effect was very good, almost like a hospital ward.

Monday was the key day of the week, Mr Everitt would have been at it long before we arrived, taking the trays of new chicks out of the machines and counting them, putting 50 birds at a time in cardboard boxes lined with hay, They were then passed to the sexer, after which the orders were made up.

The dirty trays were taken away by the women to be scrubbed and disinfected. As one machine was finished a woman would gently Hoover the fluff off the eggs due to hatch the following week 'and then scrub and disinfect the bottom of the machine.

Large bins were kept nearby to empty the egg shells into, these the men would cart away and dispose of. The work was fined down to such a method that everyone knew their task, so no time was lost. At the end of the day, the hatchery was sparkling clean again, and everyone went home feeling satisfied at having done a good days work.

The hatching season lasted from August to May, after which all the machines were stripped down and thoroughly cleaned, any repairs needed were done. All woodwork was highly polished, and the walls were whitened once more, which left everything ready for a new season. Whenever I could spare time from my other duties I used to like helping out in the various jobs. In time I learnt to set eggs in trays, load the machines, and candled the eggs, that is check to see if the eggs were fertile or not at 18 days. I shall never forget the sight of the chicks popping out of their shells on hatching days.

It was most fascinating to watch the chick sexer at work using the Japanese method of looking at the vents. How he kept his eyes open all those hours, I will never know, but he was good at his job and guaranteed 98 per cent accuracy,

It is worth noting here the different varieties of breeds and their crosses we had at that time, most of which are bygones now. Apart from the pure breeds, White Wyandotte's, Rhode Island Red, Light Sussex, Black & Brown Leghorns, there were R.I. R x Wyandotte, B1. Leghorn x R.I.R., both very popular in those days, Black & Brown Leghorn x Lt. Sussex, even Bl. Leghorn x W. Wyandotte, an unusual cross, producing white birds with odd black spots.

Mr Everitt built up a sizable business selling day old chicks and growing pullets, delivering them all over the country, I was fortunate on a number of occasions to be sent out delivering over the county, sometimes with the Boss's car and later on by van. I learnt a lot more of my adopted Cambridgeshire on those trips.

The disastrous outbreaks of Fowl Pest, plus the introduction of the new type of Hybrid birds finally caused Mr Everitt to close down his hatchery,, The incubator house is now converted into a chick rearing house,

Chapter Eight

As might be expected with poultry scattered over such a vast area they were easy prey for Foxes. One-year a particular Fox proved very sly and vicious, so it was decided to set a trap and try and shoot it.

In those days a hen house was conveniently close to the corn shed which had a large trap door that opened outwards. The idea was that a cull hen would be shut outside within easy reach of a shot gun, with the hope that the Fox would be tempted to take it.

Harry and I volunteered to take guard, so to speak. I drew the 10pm-2am shift, and as I settled down on a pile of wheat, I thought of all the hours I had spent on guard duties during my army service especially abroad in Algeria, Tunisia and Italy.

It was a beautiful night bright moonlight and my tour of duty passed without any sight of Brer Fox. Harry arrived on time and I nipped off home to bed.

Next morning I sensed a sort of tension in the air. Neither Harry nor the Boss had anything to say, and it was some time before I found out what had happened. Apparently, in the early morning light Harry saw something white bobbing about but couldn't bring himself to fire, so Brer Fox got away. Harry obviously lacked the killer touch. The hen house is no longer there but the shed remains, a constant reminder of that night on guard!

Chapter Nine

On a farm of this size there was always more work than could be done by the regular staff, so there were part-timers helping out with the manual work, such as mucking out the hen houses.

The most regular of these was Walter Sadler, my father in law, a real character, a man who had spent his life in the Fens as a mole, rat and rabbit catcher, so there was not much he did not know about them.

He was a personal friend of Mr. Everitt and had free run of the farm whenever he wished. Although he was very deaf and had poor eyesight he missed very little of what was going on, and by remarks he made to me did not always approve of what he saw.

I found him a fair man and I valued the advice he gave me over the years. He believed in doing a fair day's work, and it was hard work, pushing barrow loads of muck about, especially in the winter months. I can remember finding him one day, after a particular wet period completely bogged down in mud, not able to go forward or backwards. He was grateful for a little help that day!

He was never happier than when he was hunting rats with his dog under the chick rearing huts. Without his efforts I am sure the losses amongst the chicks would have been far greater. In the bigger houses, where the rats were under concrete floors, he was an expert at driving them out with his ferrets.

Many a Saturday afternoon I spent with him trudging across fields after rabbits. It was hard work at times, especially when a ferret had to be dug-out, but it was a rare occasion to go home empty-handed. Looking back on those days, I suppose the thing that amazed me most was the uncanny instinct that he had of knowing where the rabbits were.

Incidentally he did me a good turn, he cured me of smoking. I used to smoke a pipe and one day I lost it. I have never smoked since.

There is a tale fairly well known, that one day he was in Cambridge with Mr. Everitt and after a bit of refreshment in a pub, saw members of the Bowling Club having a game on Christ Piece, decided to liven things up a bit by letting free his ferrets amongst them. Such was his sense of humour.



Walter Sadler

Chapter Ten

In the mid 1950's the poultry world was facing up to the terrible surge of Fowl Pest, a respiratory disease for which there was no cure. Government regulations insisted that on any farm infected, all birds must be slaughtered and buried.

Imagine the consternation when in 1957 Fowl Pest was diagnosed on our farm. Overnight Mr. Everitt lost his life's work, he was shattered. A dragline was brought in and a huge hole was dug on Flexon hill. It was heart breaking seeing all those trailer loads of dead birds being tipped in. Not only our 30,000 but also birds from within a three mile radius, which under Government regulations had to be killed.

Those of us working on the farm who had poultry of any sort had to have them slaughtered. I lost a few head of Bantams, which I was rather fond of. Since then I have not kept any birds at home.

What a disaster it all was, from a hundred acres teeming with birds, to a world of deserted buildings and empty pens, and the silence. There followed then a period of several weeks of hard work, cleaning out and

scrubbing down all the houses and equipment, and they had to be spotless. Ministry inspectors were on hand to make sure of that. The smell of disinfectant was everywhere.

All the staff really put their backs into it because we knew that the sooner it was done, the sooner, we would be able to restock. We also had the added inducement of being paid a little extra money, always welcome.

We little knew then that this procedure was to be endured twice more in the next five years, in 1959 and later in 1962, when the policy was dropped in favour of a vaccination programme.

Chapter Eleven

The roads on the farm amongst the poultry pens were mostly dirt ones and during the wet periods were very difficult to negotiate with, the jalopes, so while the farm was at a virtual standstill after the first Fowl Pest outbreak. Mr. Everitt decided to have them made up with hardcore and gravel. He also proposed making a main roadway right through the farm to the White Cross Road, a distance of about a mile, which we promptly dubbed the Burma Road.

Many loads of brick rubble were used, and it was mainly the women who had the task of levelling it. At this time we had Ferguson tractor and trailers, not really made for road work, but for weeks we carted gravel from the Mepal pits, about a twelve mile round trip, and larger stones from Chippenham, about a twenty miles a trip. These tractors had no cabs so completely open to the weather. I remember some very cold winds and wet days that Autumn. Nevertheless, I personally was very grateful to have something to do. Looking back I am sure now, that it was an effort on Mr Everitt's part to keep his staff together, he could so easily have stood us off.

Later on the mid 1960's, further road improvements were carried out. This consisted of a concrete road being laid from the Home Farm entrance on the Stretham Road, right through to Breach Lane. This had become necessary because of the increasing traffic of heavy lorries bringing in meal supplies and the egg collecting lorries, which seem to be getting ever bigger.



New roads linked Flexon with Home Farm



Chapter Twelve

1955 was to prove to be another milestone in my career. It was the year I was introduced to the absorbing work involved in Pedigreeing.

Edward Everitt, the Boss's youngest son was home from the Harper Adam College with a diploma in Poultry Husbandry, and taking an interest in the farm. It was his desire to try and upgrade the three, principle breeds, White Wyandottes, Rhode Island Red and Light Sussex, and proposed setting up a special unit. I was fortunate enough to be asked to help with the project.

Our first site was on Flexon hill where eight 60fts were adapted for our use. Each house was divided into two, and the nest boxes were fitted with metal slides which could be set at a certain height, the idea being that as a hen entered a nest, she releases it and it falls trapping her in the nest.

A hundred birds were housed in each bay, each bird being numbered by a metal band on its leg, and as it laid an egg it was recorded on a chart. At the end of the months, the best layers were selected and transferred to a specially built range of small houses which were sited on each side of a road, in some former chicle rearing pens.

These were 6ft. square in size, a height of 6ft. in front, falling to 4ft. at the rear. The fronts were virtually all glass, with a row of windows at the top and bottom. The top ones were capable of being opened for ventilation. A hinged flap at the rear gave easy access for scraping out the dropping board. Two pop holes, one either side, enabled the use of two grass pens on alternative weeks. Six nest boxes, fitted with the traps were on the left as you went in the door.

Each house held 15 hens and one cockerel. Every hen had a metal tag in one wing which was listed on a chart. As each hen laid and it was released, it was recorded, and its number was written on the shell of the egg. These eggs were carefully stored until the end of the week when they were packed into trays ready for the incubator. On the 18th day when they were candled, the eggs were transferred into special hatching trays fitted out with individual little boxes with lids. This ensured the chicks did not mix on hatching day. Each box held on average four eggs. Taking the birds out was in itself a painstaking job; every chick had to have a metal band attached to one leg for identification. Later at four weeks of age these bands were replaced with metal tags pinned to a wing, a different colour for each line, and these they would keep until the end of the breeding period.

This trap-nesting work proved to be very time consuming and it was more than I could cope with on my own, so my wife Lily joined me and this was the start of a 35 year partnership.

This type of work taught me more about poultry and its behaviour than anything I have ever done before. With our constantly handling the birds, it's amazing how tame they became. In time the hens would step out of the nest boxes and hold out their wings to allow us to read their numbers. It surprised us too, how each hen had a favourite nest box and if that box was occupied would rather wait for it, instead of going next door to an empty one. It taught us too, that each hen had its own

individual time for laying through the day, some early, some late. So on our rounds we more or less knew what to expect in each house. Each hen's egg was different but after a few days you could identify each hen by its egg, as each egg was the same day after day.

We became very attached to our birds in those days, so we were sorry when it was time for them to go, but I learnt long ago that there is no room for sentiment in this business. What we had to do now was to look forward to see what sort of birds their progeny turn out to be.

For two years we made significant progress, checking, and cross-mating the different lines and we were pleased with the results of our hard work, when in 1957 Fowl Pest struck the farm, and all was lost.

Chapter Thirteen

In an effort to combat the recurring Fowl Pest problem, in 1959 it was decided to have an isolation unit set up about two miles away in a field just off the Twenty Pence Road, Wilburton. This was indeed an ideal site to choose, entrance to the field was 200 yards down a cart track called Mingay Drove, which on occasions can be very difficult to get along after tractors have carted beet off neighbouring fields.

Running alongside the Drove is the Cut, the main dyke which takes the surplus water to the river, I have been based here now for over twenty years, and I have found it very bleak and draughty in the winter months when the winds howl across the Fens, but in the summer it's a beautiful place to be. Many of the big Elm trees which grew along the Cut have fallen victims of the Dutch Elm disease and are now gone, never-the-less you can still feel cut off from the rest of the world. This proved too, to be a haven for wild life. I have seen many species from Foxes, Rabbits, Stoats, Squirrels, and of course Rats. Many types of birds too, have visited me making use of the water in the dyke. I have seen various Ducks, Moor Hens, and Herons, plus many Partridge, Pheasants and Owls.



Twentypence site approach

The type of houses chosen for this site were windowed deep littered ones, made by George Mixer Stalham Norfolk. These buildings were 110ft. long by 37ft wide and divided into four bays 24ft. by 37ft. and a meal store 15ft. by 37ft. Each bay had two pits built on either side around a support pillar. 64 nest boxes on

supports were along the sides.

Running right through the house was a monorail with trolley for use when feeding and egg collecting. Four metal hoppers 6ft. long on legs and a water hopper controlled by ball cock completed the equipment in each bay. These water hoppers were soon changed for Bec hanging drinkers five to a bay, much more efficient and easier to keep clean.

Two pop holes in each bay gave access to a straw yard 24ft square, this was completely covered in by wire netting.

The house itself was timbered framed, covered by ridged asbestos and lined with board. The windows, nine each side, eight of which had a novel feature in that they could be opened or shut by pulling a lever situated in the meal end.

Ventilation was provided by air vents built in the walls between the windows, and a row of 12 inch fans, two to a bay in the ridge roof. This was to prove inadequate and two 18 inch fans were added later.

This type of house was designed to hold 1,000 birds and proved to be very successful that three more were bought a year later. A wooden storage hopper was erected at the north end of each house with an outlet built through the wall to enable meal to be bagged up inside. In those days all meal was made on the farm by Tony and he had the task of keeping the site supplied, using a special bulk hopper fitted with augers driven by tractor.

In 1961 it was decided to concentrate all the pedigree work on this site. So all the small houses were transferred from Flexon and sited in the grass field extending southwards from the deep litter houses. At the same time to comply with the Town and Country regulations, 100 Scotch Spruce trees were planted to provide a screen, but unfortunately they did not like the conditions, and the 12 surviving trees are now planted on the north side at the entrance to the site where they are proving to be an excellent wind break.

One of the new houses was designated to be used for our pedigree work. Extra divisions were put in, making 16 bays in all, and to allow access a passage way was built right through the house. Each bay had 16 nest boxes fitted with traps, one metal meal hopper and stand, and Bec hanging drinkers. New stock was bought to replace those lost in the second outbreak of Fowl Pest. 50 birds were put in each of the pedigree pens and 1,000 in each of the other houses to provide hatching eggs for the main farm.

This new type of poultry husbandry proved quite a challenge, it meant I had to change my ideas. I had to learn how to get the litter working properly, how to control the ventilation. I made mistakes in those early days, but I tried to learn by them. Basically, rightly or wrongly, I worked on the assumption that if the conditions were right for me, it should be alright for the birds.

Having all the trap nest pens under one roof proved very convenient, and worked very well. It was very, nice too not to have to worry about the weather.

One problem I had in those early days, was getting a sufficient supply of wood shavings, as it required a depth of nine inches all over the floor before it started heating up, enabling to work properly. There was also the nest boxes to replenish. It took regular visits to our suppliers Messrs. Woods, Broad Street, Ely, and Messrs. Ambrose, of Little Downham to keep us going.

We were just beginning to get organised and feeling at home in our new surroundings, when, the dreaded Fowl Pest flared up again on the main farm, and unfortunately they were wiped out once more.

We were immediately isolated and banned from visiting the farm. Every precaution was taken, pads of straw were put down in the gateways and soaked with disinfectant. Even the egg lorries were sprayed down. Luck was with us, and though it came within 200 yards, we survived.

1963 was a crisis year for us. The severe competition from the big multi-national companies and the introduction of the new Hybrid birds made it uneconomical to carry on. This decision was a big disappointment time, for I really thought that after all the upsets in past, that we were on our way to success. However my sense of loss was slight compared to my employer, Edward Everitt. After all it was his knowledge and skill that had enabled us to get as far as we had. I shall always be grateful for the experience.

Chapter Fourteen

What was to follow next meant a new challenge, a new style of poultry husbandry; we were to produce hatching eggs for Sterling Poultry Products. Major changes had to be made, all the extra sections had to be stripped out of the pedigree house. It was decided too, that all the straw yards were no longer needed, so they were dismantled. This was to prove a wise move, for we would never have accommodated the huge meal lorries that were to come in the following years.

The next step was to clean, all the buildings. What did we do before? Everything possible was stripped down, nest boxes, pits, and the dividing sections; all were dumped in the yard ready for washing.

We are fortunate to have open arable land around us, so our neighbouring farmer was able to take our litter straight out on to land. The double doors at the ends of the buildings allowed him to bring a tractor fitted with a bucket inside and by loading trailers at the door, it was surprising how quickly he emptied them.

Washing was done with a pressure pump, using cold water. The shell of the house being done first, making sure all the air vents on the sides were clean, and the cowls on the roof. As the equipment

was washed it was carted in and reassembled. This was a hard and tedious task, as it was surprising how many bits and pieces had to be handled. The most awkward item being the nest boxes, made in one piece, they were 16ft long. As the time limit set for getting everything ready was only six weeks, it can be appreciated that we had to keep at it.

This first flock were 16 week old Sterling White Link, a smallish bird and rather flighty. These started laying at 20 weeks of age.

After a month we had to start sorting the eggs for hatching, and this proved to be a tiresome task. Being pure white, every little mark showed, and had to be dry cleaned, using a pad covered with sand paper. Any eggs coated with dirt were discarded and these we were allowed to wash, but on no account must they be mixed with the others.

The hatching eggs were packed in boxes of 360 eggs, and were collected twice a week by Sterling, and taken to their hatchery at Culford, Bury St. Edmunds. The rejected eggs went to Messrs. Todds packing station at Cottenham.

We were hampered in those days by lack of space for egg sorting, all w/e had was a small section cordoned off in the meal store. Unfortunately the dust from the poultry pens filtered through the cracks, and made our task more difficult. Twelve months later we moved into another house where we had double the room, and also had the use of an egg grader, but we still had the dust to contend with.

These were busy days with all the feeding being done by hand, and the egg collecting and cleaning. Nest boxes too, had to be replenished with wood shavings, this was most important as broken eggs meant more work when sorting. Understandably the nest boxes could not be done until late afternoon when the birds had finished laying, which meant working late at least two days, I made a habit of doing this Monday and Tuesday, two houses one week and two the next, and I have stuck to it over the years.

The meal was made by Spillers, and delivered by Messrs. W.O. Smith of Bury St, Edmunds, direct from mills in London, and Liverpool in 16 ton loads, 640 four-stone bags, more often than not at an inconvenient time, usually when it was time to stop for the day, The use of bags made our wooden meal bins redundant, and they were soon dismantled and transferred to the main farm.

The maximum time each flock was kept was 58 weeks, and then as the policy was all in, all put, all the houses had to be stripped down and washed once again. We had two flocks in this fashion and then another change, we were going to start with day old chicks.

Other changes were on the way too, Sterling had now become Ross Poultry, and under the new set up, they were hiring the whole site, and were to be responsible for everything except labour. It virtually meant we had two sets of bosses to please,

I found I would have more to contend with, for I was expected to run the place as if it was my own, (without worrying about the bills) with an occasional visit from a fieldsman. The paper work was the biggest worry, returns were expected for everything,

Day old chicks need heat, so two bays in each house were piped to take Calor gas. Four double six space heaters were suspended in each bay and fed from six 104 lb gas bottles fitted up outside of the buildings. To enable the heat to be contained, the two middle sections were completely draped with black polythene. Rings of cardboard about 6ft. in diameter were erected around each heater to stop the birds straying from the heat. These were extended as they grew, until at six weeks of age, they were discarded. Each ring held 500 chicks, feed consisted of chick crumbs for the first three days and then growers meal. This was given to them on egg trays until the birds were big enough to eat from metal hoppers. Six water fountains were placed in each. The nearest water tap was by the main door some 60ft. away, so there was no lack of exercise in replenishing them.

After a fortnight automatic water drinkers were brought into use, and gradually over the weeks more hoppers were introduced so they were fed once a day.

At eight weeks all the heat was turned off and the birds were allowed to spread over the adjoining bays. After a month all the polythene was taken down and the birds divided out into separate pens.

Finally at 18 to 20 weeks of age, stock birds were introduced from another farm.

Our first flock of day-olds proved to be a new type of Hybrid, Nick chick. White egggers, they were very productive and for the size of the birds the eggs were surprisingly large. But they were like

Pigeons, spent more time on the roof bearers than on the floor. At least they stopped the dust collecting on the beams.

This was a very enjoyable time for me, for I have always liked looking after young chicks. It's very satisfying to watch their progress and to know that whatever the final production figures, hopefully good ones, that you and nobody else is responsible.

After three years, that is two flocks, Ross wanted a quicker turn round so it was back to point of lay Pullets.

Five years later, Ross in their wisdom, changed over to Favor Parker meal. It still meant unloading a lot of bags

In the late 1960s Big Dutchman feeders, enough for two houses became available when a big wired floor laying house on the main, farm was changed over to batteries. They worked so well that two more were bought to equip the other houses. What a difference they made, I still had to fill the bin by hand but the feed was taken round the house by chain, a great time saver.

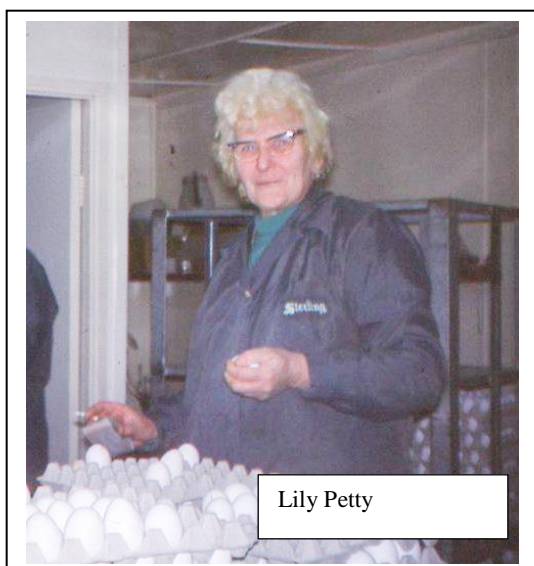
About 1970 another event which made life much pleasanter for us, was the arrival of a separate egg room. It was a war time prefab building, divided into a sorting room, a special egg cooling room in which we built a fumigating cabinet, washroom and office. Work seems much easier when you have room to move. Soon after Palletainers were introduced for packing eggs in, instead of boxes. These were metal frames on wheels, which took 320 eggs at a time and loaded straight onto a tail lift of the egg lorry. So much easier than carrying boxes.

Up to now I had been responsible for doing most of the washing of the building and equipment which meant I had little opportunity to have some time off. So I was very grateful when it was decided to put the work out to contractors.

Chapter Fifteen

1977 brought our final bit of modernization, bulk storage meal bins. Made by Uttley Ingam, they held five tons and sited so the meal could be augered straight into the Big Dutchman bins. Push button poultry husbandry had arrived. Goodbye to those four-stone bags, for all the meal was now delivered in bulk, and blown into the bins.

Another change of meal supplier in 1980, Nitrovit of Southery who carried on until 1980 when our present one R.J. Seaman & Sons took over. Over the years I have had the utmost co-operation from all the various firms, and I am very grateful.



1980 was a sad year for me, for I lost my constant companion for the last 25 years when my wife Lily retired on her 60th birthday in November. She had taken a great interest in our work, and knew as much as I did. So much so that on occasion she pulled me up for not doing something I should have done. I came to rely on her a great deal and though I have had some wonderful help from others since, things have not been quite the same.

I am sure most people understand poultry do not recognise weekends, so they produce eggs every day, which means they have to be collected, I have been very fortunate to have a succession of willing boys to help me in this task. Andrew and Nigel are now in regular work, Mark, who is still with me at present, leaves school in a few weeks and has a job to go to. I like to think that working with mc has helped to install in them how important it is to take an interest

in what they do. I thank them for their help and wish them every success.

It's interesting to note the different flocks I have had to look after since the site was hired out, Hick Chicks, White Links, Apollo, Rangers, (brown eggers), Ross Brown, and the last three flocks have been, Ross 1s, Broiler Breeders, These last birds have been the most complicated ones I have ever had to look after. Being gross feeders a tight rationing programme had to be followed, water too, had to

be restricted to three hours a day during the rearing. The maximum day light allowed was eight hours, this was increased by stages when laying commenced, up to a 17-hour day.

This present flock was 12 weeks old when I received them, 8888 Pullets, 1242 Cockerels. As a point of interest our houses were built to hold a maximum of 2,000 birds, at 250 a bay. Now it's 635.

Their ration then was 32 kilo of pellets per bay, scattered over the litter as a scratch feed. When I opened the door to go in, they literally took off, I had to fight my way in, with birds all over me. The rations increased a little each week until at 21 weeks of age, the pellets were changed for meal, and I was able to bring the automatic feeders into use. How nice it was to go into the houses to find them all peacefully scratching away in the litter. It's easier now to keep to the ration as weighing machines are fitted over all the bins, these dole out the meal 10 kilos at a time.

Now the birds are 33 weeks old, they started laying at 24 weeks and peaked at 79 per cent, well on target. The ration is 390 kilos of meal plus a scratch feed of 10 kilos of Barley per house. We, that is, Chilvers, Jane and I are now handling some 6,700 eggs a day, sending about 44,000 hatching eggs a week to "Golden Produce" hatchery at Diss, Norfolk.

Some facts and figures from the 1982-3 flock of Ross Is. I used 386,880 kilos of meal, and 1200 bales of wood shavings, these were supplied by Snowflake, Boston, Lines,

Since the early 1960's, while I have been based in the Fen, the Home Farm has taken on a new look. Gradually over the years all the hen houses and miles of wire netting have disappeared, in fact the farm has reverted to open arable land once again. Never again will we see the beautiful sight of thousands of chickens happily scratching about in the grass.

All laying birds are now confined in brick buildings. A total of 40,000 are in cages, producing some 30,000 eggs a day. There is only one site on

Flexon, that is the former wire floored laying house, This holds 14,500 birds and is managed by Tony, with Kathleen and Betty picking up the eggs. The rest are housed in the former Brooder house and rearing shed and the six purpose-built houses sited close to the main road on the Home farm. Here Carol and Brenda are the main egg collectors, with Brenda being responsible for grading eggs for sale.

Even chicks are reared from day old in cages, 14,000 at any one time. These are housed in the former hatchery, and two purpose-built houses on Flexon and looked after mainly by Keith with support from his wife Betty. It seems to me the major problem with the battery system is

disposing of the droppings, amounting to several tons a week. All the batteries are fitted with continuous revolving belts and the manure is augered straight out of the building into trailers which are then emptied on to a site on Flexon hill. Contractors clear it away once a year.

It's a messy smelly job and I don't envy the men who have to do it especially Bernard who is responsible for the Home Farm, so has more to do.

The looking after battery cages is one side of poultry husbandry of which I have had no experience. While I realise the economic necessity for them, I much prefer my birds running round my feet.



Chapter Sixteen

To many people working on a poultry farm means just throwing a bit of corn about and picking up eggs, but my experience has taught me that you can be called on to do almost anything, Carpenter, electrician, mechanic, and even Vet, in fact you need to be a jack of all trades, if master of none.

There has been much controversy over the question of de-beaking. I have had to do it, and in my opinion, if it is done properly at day old, it is beneficial to the birds, and to people like me who are constantly handling them. A chicken can be a vicious bird, as the scars on my hands and arms will testify.

To me the most important thing in poultry husbandry is routine. Plan your work, do the same thing, i.e. feeding, egg collecting at the same time every day, the birds get to know when to expect you, and they will respond to your management.

This then has been my life. I have worked hard and for long hours, but then this has been at ray own choice. I have always tried to do my best, and I can look back with some satisfaction on what I have achieved.



Bob retired as a farm site manager to the Flexon Poultry Farm in August 1986

He was presented with the East of England Agricultural Society's Long Service Medal by the by the High Sheriff of Cambridgeshire, Dr Irwin Peck to mark his 40 years' service. Also at the presentation was his wife Lily who had work for the same firm for 25 years and had received a clock on a previous occasion. The presentation was made at the home of the poultry farm director Mr Edward Everitt of Flexon House, Wilburton.



High
Sheriff,
Edward
Everitt &
R.S. Petty